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**THE DISABLED VETERANS TAX IMPACTS THOUSANDS OF VETERANS
IN HAWAII'S 1ST CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT**

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The Disabled Veterans Tax Impacts Thousands of Veterans in Hawaii’s 1st Congressional District

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every year, hundreds of thousands of disabled military veterans pay a “Disabled Veterans Tax” that effectively forces them to give up their disability benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. At the request of Rep. Abercrombie, this report analyzes the impact of this regressive tax on veterans in the 1st Congressional District of Hawaii.

Under current law, veterans with 20 years of military service are entitled to receive retirement benefits from the Department of Defense. In addition, veterans who incurred service-related disabilities are entitled to receive disability compensation benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. If a veteran has both 20 years of military service and a service-related disability, however, the veteran's military retirement benefit is reduced on a dollar-for-dollar basis by the amount the veteran receives in disability compensation. This reduction in the veteran's retirement benefits is commonly known as the “Disabled Veterans Tax.” Effectively, the disability compensation received by these veterans is taxed at a 100% rate.

This report contains the first analysis of the effect of the Disabled Veterans Tax in the 1st Congressional District. The analysis finds that the Disabled Veterans Tax has a significant impact on veterans in the district. Specifically, it finds that:

- **Thousands of veterans in Rep. Abercrombie's district are subject to the Disabled Veterans Tax.** Approximately 4,150 veterans in Hawaii lose military retirement benefits due to the Disabled Veterans Tax. This includes 2,196 veterans in Rep. Abercrombie's district. An estimated one out of every four retired veterans in the district (25%) is subject to the Disabled Veterans Tax.
- **The Disabled Veterans Tax costs veterans in Rep. Abercrombie's district millions of dollars annually.** Statewide, veterans subject to the Disabled Veterans Tax lose \$21.6 million in benefits annually. In Rep. Abercrombie's district, the veterans subject to the Disabled Veterans Tax lose \$11.4 million in benefits each year. This is an average of \$5,190 per affected veteran in the district. For these veterans, this amounts to a reduction in military benefits of 21%.
- **Legislation to end the Disabled Veterans Tax would help veterans in Rep. Abercrombie's district.** Rep. Abercrombie has cosponsored H.R. 303, the Retired Pay Restoration Act of 2003. Passage of this bill would end the Disabled Veterans Tax for any veteran with over 20 years of military service, restoring full benefits to veterans in Rep. Abercrombie's district.

THE DISABLED VETERANS TAX

Disabled military retirees receive benefits through two agencies, the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Veterans who have served for at least 20 years in the military receive standard retirement benefits from the Department of Defense. These benefits are determined by multiplying 2.5% of the service member's final basic pay by the number of years of service. Thus, a service member who has served for 20 years would receive annual retirement benefits equal to 50% of their final basic pay. Presently, there are an estimated 1.4 million retired veterans who receive average retirement pay of \$22,000 annually.¹

Veterans who have service-related disabilities also receive compensation through the VA. The goal of these payments is to compensate the veterans for the reduction in earnings capacity resulting from disabilities incurred during military service.² These payments are based on a scale of disability severity. This scale ranges from 10% disabled to 100% disabled. Average monthly disability payments in 2002 ranged from approximately \$100 for a veteran with a 10% disability to \$2,100 for a veteran who was 100% disabled.³

There are presently an estimated 560,000 retired service members who qualify for military retirement benefits and VA disability benefits. An 1891 law, however, bars "concurrent receipt" of both military retirement benefits and disability benefits. As a result, for veterans who receive both military retirement benefits from DOD and disability benefits from the VA, military retirement benefits are reduced dollar-for-dollar for each dollar of VA disability benefits.⁴

¹ Congressional Research Service, *Military Retirement: Major Legislative Issues* (July 10, 2003). In addition, retirees with less than 20 years service can also receive disability retirement benefits if they have either (1) completed at least 8 years of creditable military service and received a physical disability rating of 30% or greater from an evaluation board or (2) incurred a disability resulting from active duty. There are an estimated 100,000 of these service members currently receiving disability retirement.

² GAO, *Military and Veterans Benefits: Observations on the Concurrent Receipt of Military Retirement and VA Disability Compensation* (Mar. 2003) (GAO-03-575T). Additional benefits are paid to veterans who are at least 30% disabled and have dependents and to very severely disabled veterans who qualify for "special monthly compensation."

³ *Id.*

⁴ Disabled retirees can choose to have either their military retirement benefits reduced by the amount of their VA compensation, or their VA compensation reduced by the amount of their retirement benefit. Because military retirement benefits are taxable, while VA

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The result of this policy — known as “the Disabled Veterans Tax” — is that hundreds of thousands of disabled veterans are denied billions of dollars in benefits each year. According to data from the Department of Defense, an estimated 565,000 veterans lose over \$3 billion in benefits annually due to the Disabled Veterans Tax.

LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE THE DISABLED VETERANS TAX

Periodically, Congress has made efforts to end the restrictions on concurrent receipt of military retiree and VA disability benefits. Most recently, in the 107th Congress in 2002, both the House and the Senate passed legislation to restore benefits to many veterans.⁵

Ultimately, neither the House nor the Senate proposals were enacted into law. The Bush Administration threatened to veto the entire DOD authorization legislation if either proposal was included in the final legislation. As a result, the final version of the legislation provided for “special pay” not subject to the offset only for veterans who suffered an injury for which they received a Purple Heart or who had a severe disability rated at 60% or more resulting from armed conflict, hazardous service, training activities that simulate war, or war-related circumstances.⁶ This law requires DOD to make a complicated calculation concerning each disability of each disabled retiree to determine which disabilities are combat related and therefore qualify for the special pay.

The final legislation was so narrowly crafted that it allows only an estimated 33,000 veterans to receive both military retirement and disability benefits.⁷ And it is so complicated that it may take years for retirees to prove their entitlement to special pay. For example, in cases involving a disability resulting from a retiree's collision with an armored tank, payment of special compensation will depend upon whether the tank hit the retiree or the retiree hit the tank.⁸

compensation is not, the vast majority of retirees choose to reduce their military compensation.

⁵ The House legislation would have allowed veterans with disability ratings of 60% or greater to receive both military retirement benefits and VA disability benefits. This legislation would have restored benefits to an estimated 111,000 veterans. The Senate legislation would have allowed all disabled veterans to receive both military retirement pay and VA disability benefits. See Congressional Research Service, *Concurrent Receipt of Military Retirement and VA Disability Benefits: Budgetary Issues* (Nov. 15, 2002).

⁶ H.R. 4546, *FY 2003 DOD Authorization Act* (Nov. 2002).

⁷ CRS, *supra* note 5.

⁸ Department of Defense, *Combat-Related Special Compensation (CRSC) Web Site* (2003) (online at <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/crsc/>).

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Frustrated by Congress' repeated failures to repeal the Disabled Veterans Tax, Rep. Abercrombie and other members of the House of Representatives launched a renewed legislative effort to end the tax in the 108th Congress. The goal of this effort is to enact legislation cosponsored by Rep. Abercrombie: the Retired Pay Restoration Act of 2003 (H.R. 303). This legislation would eliminate the prohibition on concurrent receipt of veterans' retirement and disability benefits for all military retirees with at least 20 years of service. H.R. 303 currently has 352 cosponsors in the House.

Republican leaders in Congress oppose H.R. 303 and have not allowed a vote on the bill despite its broad support.⁹ In response, Rep. Jim Marshall (D-GA) filed a "discharge petition" on June 12, 2003, that would force House leaders to allow a vote on the bill.¹⁰ If the discharge petition receives the signatures of 218 House members (a majority of the House), House rules require a vote on the legislation. There are presently 200 Democratic members, one Republican member, and one independent member of the House who have signed the discharge petition.

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

This report was requested by Rep. Neil Abercrombie, who represents the 1st Congressional District of Hawaii, which is located on the island of Oahu. Rep. Abercrombie requested this report in order to determine (1) the impact of the Disabled Veterans Tax on veterans in the district and (2) the potential benefits for veterans in the district from enactment of H.R. 303.

To conduct this analysis, the Special Investigations Division obtained and analyzed data from the Office of the Actuary of the Department of Defense. The data includes zip code-level data on the total number of military retirees who are forced to pay the Disabled Veterans Tax. It also includes data on the monthly cost of the tax. Using this database, the Special Investigations Division summarized the impact of the Disabled Veterans Tax on the 1st Congressional District.¹¹

⁹ House Speaker Dennis Hastert, *Transcript of Press Conference* (June 26, 2003) (online at <http://releases.usnewswire.com/GetRelease.asp?id=137-06272003>).

¹⁰ Discharge Petition 108-002.

¹¹ All data in the DOD database was available at the 5-digit zip code level. Because 5-digit zip codes can sometimes be split between two or more congressional districts, the analysis assumes that when a zip code is split between two districts, half of the impacted veterans in the zip code are in each congressional district. Similarly, when a zip code is split between three districts, one-third of the impacted veterans in the zip code are assumed to be in each congressional district.

FINDINGS

The Disabled Veterans Tax Affects Thousands of Veterans in Hawaii's 1st Congressional District

There are 14,709 veterans in Hawaii who receive military retirement benefits. Of these veterans, 4,146 veterans — 28% — also receive disability benefits from the VA and are subject to the Disabled Veterans Tax.

In Rep. Abercrombie's district, there are 8,692 veterans who receive military retirement benefits. Of these veterans, 2,196 — 25% — also receive disability benefits from the VA and are subject to the Disabled Veterans Tax.

The Disabled Veterans Tax Costs Veterans in Hawaii's 1st Congressional District Millions of Dollars Annually

Statewide, the Disabled Veterans Tax costs veterans \$1.8 million each month in lost disability benefits. This is equivalent to \$21.7 million annually.

In the 1st Congressional District, the Disabled Veterans Tax costs veterans \$950,000 each month in lost disability benefits. This is equivalent to \$11.4 million annually. On a per-veteran basis, the Disabled Veterans Tax costs each of the 2,196 impacted veterans in Rep. Abercrombie's district an average of \$5,190 annually.

The average retired veteran in the 1st Congressional District receives veterans related benefits of approximately \$19,000 annually. The Disabled Veterans Tax reduces benefits for affected veterans in the district by 21%.

Legislation To Eliminate the Disabled Veterans Tax Would Have Significant Benefits in Hawaii's 1st Congressional District

Legislation sponsored by Rep. Abercrombie, the Retired Pay Restoration Act of 2003 (H.R. 303), would eliminate the Disabled Veterans Tax for all retired veterans with at least 20 years of service. Passage of H.R. 303 would result in increased benefits for 4,146 veterans in Hawaii. These veterans would receive an increase in benefits of \$21.7 million annually.

Within the 1st Congressional District, passage of H.R. 303 would result in increased benefits for 2,196 veterans. These veterans would receive an increase in benefits of \$11.4 million annually. On a per-veteran basis, the affected veterans in Rep. Abercrombie's district would see an increase of \$5,190 annually in benefits.

CONCLUSION

An 1891 law prevents disabled veterans from receiving both military retirement and VA service-connected disability compensation. As a result, hundreds of thousands of military veterans are forced to pay the Disabled Veterans Tax, effectively reducing their benefits by billions of dollars each year. This analysis finds that 2,196 disabled veterans in Rep. Abercrombie's district are forced to pay the Disabled Veterans Tax. Legislation cosponsored by Rep. Abercrombie would eliminate the Disabled Veterans Tax for these veterans.